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U.S. Preparing to Start 'Thin' Antimissile Screen

Red China Threat, Political Pressure Believed Behind Reported Decision

By the Associated Press

U.S. government leaders were reported today to have decided on a start toward building an antimissile system to defend the United States against the kind of nuclear threat Red China could pose by the mid-1970s.

Such a "thin" Nike X system would involve a screen of missile-killer batteries that would throw a protective umbrella over the country. Its estimated cost: from $3 billion to $6 billion.

The Defense Department replied with a "no comment" when asked whether President Johnson had approved a go-ahead.

Pentagon officials were unusually close-mouthed about the subject of a speech Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara is due to make Monday before an editors' meeting in San Francisco.

It was not certain McNamara would make the antimissile announcement at that time. The administration could hold off to give the Soviet Union one more chance to agree on a mutual limitation on deployment of an antimissile system.

Administration officials have indicated they were losing patience with the Russians and some military officers have argued they are stalling.

Johnson and McNamara have been under growing pressure to take the long-delayed step.

That pressure became intense after McNamara acknowledged in November that the Soviet Union had started deploying an antimissile system. The Soviet emplacements were reported around Moscow and Leningrad.

Congressional demands for action escalated after Red China exploded what was believed to be a hydrogen bomb in a test in June.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the civilian heads of the Army, Navy and Air Force all have gone on record as favoring a start on an antimissile defense for the United States.

Republican leaders have shown signs they would make a political issue of the delay and even pro-administration stalwarts in the Senate have prodded Johnson publicly.

The reported administration decision comes at a time when the word has gone out throughout the defense establishment to hold down on spending—and to cut where possible—because of the rising costs of the Vietnam war.

The administration antimissile

See MISSILE, Page A-9

MISSILE

Continued From Page A-1

move, which opens the door to spending billions of dollars, thus indicates the political pressure was getting too hot—or that intelligence indicates the Red Chinese are making faster progress toward an intercontinental ballistic missile than had been expected some months ago.

McNamara has forecast that the Chinese might test an ICBM this year, but that Peking probably would not have a significant number of long-range missiles before the mid-1970s.

But the Senate-House Atomic Energy Committee said in a report last month, the Chinese should be able to develop a hydrogen warhead with the blast equivalent of 1 million tons of TNT by about 1970, and have ready operational ICBMs by 1971 or 1972.

Defense sources have estimated a "thin" protective screen of long-range Spartan and short-range Sprint missile-killers, plus their vital radar, could be in place in about 5 years.

Hearings Planned Soon

The Atomic Energy Committee is due to hold hearings on the whole question soon, and this prospect may have played a part in bringing about the go-ahead decision by the Johnson administration.

McNamara is on record as stating that any missile defense against a Soviet-style threat—that is, against clouds of Soviet ICBMs equipped with sophisticated decoys to fool the defense—would be powerless to prevent millions of American deaths, no matter how much is spent on it.

Pentagon experts have calculated a system designed to cope with a Soviet-style threat could cost up to $40 billion, and still not be anything close to iron clad.

A "thin" defense could be deployed in various ways. The most likely would be a screen of perhaps 300 Spartan missiles in batteries of 10 each, so positioned as to cover the probable approaches of Red Chinese warheads.

The Spartan has a range of some 400 miles and is designed to intercept enemy warheads well out in space, killing them with X-rays and neutrons.